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AUTHOR Hughes, A. O.
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ABSTRACT

Aspects to consider in studying the film "The Red Kite" are (1) a synopsis of the story, which concerns a young father's musings about life and death; (2) the film's structure, which focuses on the father's encounters in a store, on a bus, in his home, at a party, and finally on a hill while flying the kite; (3) possible themes, such as "human effort motivated by love transcends all difficulties and doubts"; (4) the development of the theme through structure and mood--color, the spiritual and physical climbing effect, characterization, symbolism; and (5) film techniques, such as close-up views, flashbacks, sound effects, and panoramic shots. (JM)

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Film Guide For "The Red Kite"

A. O. HUGHES, *Scarborough Board of Education*
J. O'REGAN, *Sir Wilfrid Laurier C. I., Scarborough*

(Written and directed by Morten Parker, based on Hugh Hood's short story "Flying a Red Kite", produced by National Film Board of Canada, 17 minutes, colour. *Flying a Red Kite* (and other stories) is published by The Ryerson Press, Toronto, $2.50)

Synopsis

It is late summer in Montreal. A man is window-shopping, sees a red kite and buys it for his daughter. (This mildly impulsive act moves him

to contemplate the whole meaning of life.) On his way home on a bus, while passing a crowded cemetery, the man with the red kite hears a tipsy Irish priest declare that the cemetery is the real end. The young man wonders if death is all—and the gnawing thought stays with him until the next day when he succeeds in flying the kite for his little girl and so banishes his own doubts.

General Comment

The colours of the late summer, the varied settings—especially the climb to the top of Montreal's mountain park—the red kite in the blue sky, the long shimmering view down the St. Lawrence, the subtle characterization and personality contrasts, the bitter-sweet mood—all of this, and more, makes this film a strangely haunting view of the city and of the time.

The Structure of the Film

1. *Store*: The red kite is established as the central motif.
2. *Bus Stop*: The young man (the father, Fred by name) appears to be reticent and shy. (Is the girl's reaction to be interpreted as a snubbing of a feeble advance—another one of life's little failures?)
3. *Bus Ride*: The reactions of the bus passengers range from disgust to concern to indifference to amused embarrassment. Although there is some humour, the laughter is nervous and strained rather than relaxed and hearty. The viewer is more concerned with the young man with the kite than with the tipsy priest and workman because he has begun to identify with him. Most of the bus passengers already know that one of the tipsy travellers is a priest—this accounts for some of the reactions. The viewer, however, does not know the man's identity because a large package hides his clerical collar. The hero doesn't know either. Thus the revelation comes as a complete surprise and is effective because public desecration of sacred cows is disturbing.
4. *Exit from Bus*: The hero pauses in thought. From a thematic point of view this is a generating incident. When he thinks, the viewer thinks. This is only one of several generating incidents: purchase of the kite, spoiled priest incident, the girl at the bus stop. All of these are subtle, but the hero's pause as he leaves the bus is particularly effective.
5. *At Home*: This scene establishes the other two important characters—the man's wife and his daughter. The hero is shown as more aggressive in his own lair. The wife comes on as a low-key antagonist. The *daughter is a foil* to the wife because it is Dee Dee who gives en-

couragement to the discouraged father. The colour of the apartment is important: the red stands out against the browns, etc. The colour of the hill is much the same.

6. *Party*: The hero continues to reflect. He is set opposite a "party type" and a cynic. Still there is no resolution to his problem. (Perhaps the wife of the dancer might have been a more suitable wife for the hero than the woman currently in tow.) The wind and the storm add to the mood. The party is a comment on society.
7. *Bedroom*: One suspected problem of the hero is clearly revealed. Although Fred may already have lost faith in both God and himself, he tells his wife of the latter only. The wife is further revealed as an antagonist. Her attitude towards comfort and satisfaction with the status quo acts as a contrast to her husband's ideas. Her remarks are cutting. What might have been the outcome of the kite-flying incident if the wife had accompanied husband and daughter? Would Fred have given up completely after the first failure?
8. *Climb—First Stage*: Fred fails to fly his kite. (This occurs in front of the university buildings.) The role of the daughter is revealed more clearly. The wife, of course, does not appear again in the film. Flashbacks to the cemetery and the words of the priest are used to keep the theme before us. The father's struggle is more intense at this point since a complete failure in front of his daughter would be serious.
9. *Climb—Second Stage*: The role of the daughter is fully revealed. She gives strength to the flagging ego and will of the father. (Does the music detract from or add to the effect?) The berries incident shows the trust of the daughter and reveals the father's concern over passing of youth.

Theme—Possible Statements

Human effort, motivated by love, transcends all difficulties and doubts.

(Student answers: belief in God; belief in life after death; man needs a "burning bush"—a sign or revelation—to renew his faith.)

Man's loss of faith in himself and God is recovered through the devotion of a child.

Man's loss of faith in himself and God is recovered by a small but immediate success.

By an examination of his own failures in the light of another's fall, a man rises to overcome despair through action and renewed faith.

Because a man tries to recover his lost faith, he is rewarded by insight

at least. Effort alone, however, is not enough; love (that of the daughter, not the wife) provides the meaning.

How the Theme is Developed

1. *Through the General Structure.* The tension is created at the beginning, and is maintained throughout. The worried young man becomes increasingly more agitated until his final victory. The physical movement of the film is constantly up—symbolic of the man's resurgence of faith. From the first settings in the lower part of the city, the action moves up to the apartment, up to the first level of the hill (university buildings), up to the second level, to the kite flying high over the cemetery, to the jet's vapour trail.
2. *Through the Mood.* The mood is developed through the use of colour, the climbing effect, the characterization, and the symbolism.
   (a) *Colour.* Red, the colour of passion, excitement, and redemption begins and ends the film. But red is not only colour. The warm browns and yellows establish a tone of richness and maturity, not perhaps entirely suitable.
   (b) *The Climbing Effect*—the action proceeding from the lower part of the city to the apartment to the hill complements the man's resurgence of faith.
   (c) *Characterization.* The camera work is most effective here in establishing a series of contrasts: the priest with his false hilarity versus the drunken friend who is really enjoying himself; the wife who is critical versus the child who is trusting; the introvert versus the extrovert—the man who is unhappy, discouraged, and extremely sensitive versus the "party type" who is carefree, confident, self-satisfied, and somewhat callous.
   (d) *Symbolism.* The kite is the key motif—representing man's discovery of truth and self-esteem. There are several crosses in the film, the most obvious being that formed by the cross members of the kite; at the end of the film there is the cross formed by the jet vapour trail and the string of the kite. The bleak cemetery contrast the symbols of success—airborne kite, jet, beautiful city. Symbols of success fall into two groups—those associated with the airborne kite and the father's renewal of faith and those associated with the apartment and its material splendour. This contrast points up the difference between real (spiritual) success and apparent well-being which is based solely on materialism. There are several contrasting images of failure—missing the bus, nubbing by the girl, etc. The party, the storm, the hill, the climb-

ing, the jet—all of these might be considered as specific examples. The party, for example, might represent the materialism, the fleeting nature of pleasure which is based on material things only. On the hill or mountain top, the man (like Moses) experiences a "great manifestation," "a burning bush", a renewal of faith.

Film Techniques

1. *Close-ups* demonstrate the intimacy between father and daughter, particularly in the scene just before they reach the top of the mountain. The close-up of the priest as he slowly lowers the newspaper allowing the viewers to see his clerical collar adds an element of surprise. The close-ups of individuals on the bus disclose the emotional reactions: shock of the women at the drunken condition of the priest; worry of the father; embarrassment of the young male watcher. The close-up of the "who's it for a what's it" fellow at the party as he handles the kite points up the contrast between the two symbols—the party-goer representing the wordly and the kite representing the holy. What is the viewer's reaction to this incident? (Is it one of uneasiness because the kite is a "holy thing"?)
2. *The flashbacks* to the cemetery and to the words of the priest keep the viewer aware of the continuing and deepening problem for the child's father—his temporary loss of faith.
3. *Sound effects.* The fast, light music during the party suggests the carefree and shallow concerns of everyone except the father. The mysterious, high pitch of the horn at the end of the film is in keeping with the father's renewal of faith.
4. *Panoramic shots,* especially during the slow climb up the slopes of Mount Royal and during the final flying of the kite, serve different purposes: they contrast the close-ups; they make man seem small by comparison; they make the city (man's world) seem like a toy; they put man into proper perspective—man in the world is a small part of the overall scheme of things.

Some Possible Questions

1. Show that the action of the story occurs on several distinct physical levels.
2. In which scenes does the kite or its colour appear?
3. What does the kite mean to each character in the story?
4. What is the effect of the flashbacks to the cemetery and the words of the priest? When do these flashbacks occur?

5. How does the film-maker show that the man (Fred) is greatly disturbed by the words of the priest?
6. Compare the film presentation with the text story by Hugh Hood, pointing out the important differences. Which medium deals more convincingly with the theme? Justify your opinion.
7. Discuss the film-maker's use of three of the following devices: flashback, close-ups, colour, sound effects, setting, motif. (Give an example of each and state the film-maker's purpose.)